

## THE QUENCHING

By Mrs. W. K. Clifford

ILLUSTRATION BY CHARLES E. CHAMBERS

### I

HE country will be much better for you," Herbert Burndale told his wife. "We will settle down at the cottage for good."

"And this house?" She struggled to make her voice steady.

"The agent says he can let it. I have given him instructions." He turned to go.

She arrested him with both hands on his arm. He pulled up quickly; she saw the hard expression on his face and the hands fell back. "I should hate it. I should die in the country—eat my heart out—cut my throat."

"Well—we will try it." He smiled his wintry smile, she called it, at her vehemence. "We won't discuss it again." He left the room; she heard the little defiant bang of the street door, not loud or startling, but with the suggestion of finality that was in his voice: it seemed like an Amen to his words.

She watched him cross the square. He was fairly tall, a thin man, thirty-two or three, perhaps, neither dark nor fair, with a rather long, pale face that seemed to match his figure. It struck her, in a grotesque sort of way, that, just as his bones were sparingly covered with flesh, so were his heart and soul sparingly furnished with warmth and emotion, and words with which to express himself had been dealt out with a niggardly hand. She remembered his love-making before their marriage: he had been fairly appreciative and polite; he had made evident his most courteous desire to marry her, and, to that extent, it had been flattering; but there had been nothing more in it. She had taken him to be a reticent man, to whom words and caresses were difficult; the fact of his proposal implied that everything else was a matter of course, and she accepted him for reasons of her own. He

was an upright and honorable gentleman; there was restful security in that knowledge; he had provided her with material things as far as a fair allowance, a pretty house, and a country cottage represented them; and he had given her some companionship, with an air of its being due to their relationship rather than to any desire for her company. He overlooked her life in an irritating manner; she felt that he exacted the wifely and housewifely duties that a former generation expected from women; he kept—she knew it and it half-frightened her—a careful watch on her doings, and tried to lay out occupations for her. For the rest, the things that make life worth living, to women especially, an eager, expected feast of varying joys and sorrows, she found herself seated at an almost bare table.

"It's no use," she said to herself. "I can't bear it any longer. A break won't hurt him much, and going on will kill me." There was a looking-glass to the right of the window; she looked a little desperately at her own reflection. She was thirty; an interesting rather than a pretty woman, though there were people who called her beautiful, and at times she justified the descriptions; she had her wonderful days, when she carried all before her, but there were others when she looked haggard, dull, and almost plain. She had gray eyes that easily questioned or implored, a pathetic mouth, brown hair, with shades of red in it, and a smile that was charming: it came suddenly and not too often and took one by surprise, as a light does that has been shrouded and for a moment is unveiled.

"I'll do it," she said as she turned away from the glass. "I'll do it at once. It's no good going on to the years and years before us, if I stay. I'll do it now—some courage, a crisis, and it will be over." Then, suddenly, she found herself faced by the difficulty of how to begin the freedom of which a sense came to her as a

whiff of air from the sea. "I'll go to Claire Starfield for the night, anyhow," she thought; "I'll tell her; she'll advise me; she was always so sensible." She opened a blotting-book with a jade cover and a gold monogram in the centre—it had been a wedding present from a rich cousin—and wrote:

"DEAR HERBERT:

"It's no good pretending that we are happy together. We are not. We should each be better alone, and I want to be alone again—to choose my place and pleasures and pursuits. There need be no scandal; let us just go our separate ways. Write to me at Claire Starfield's. It takes courage to do this, but it's no good going on as we are.

"EVE."

## II

MRS. STARFIELD was taken aback that afternoon when her husband walked into the drawing-room.

"Oh, my darling Geoffrey," she said. "Why on earth have you come home so soon? Eve Burndale came a few minutes ago, and we wanted to talk."

"Very well—very well," he said in an injured voice. "I'll go out again, if I'm not wanted. I should have liked to talk to her, too; she's a pretty woman."

"You wicked man," she laughed. "Did you ever talk to an ugly one?"

"I never made love to an ugly one. But where is she?"

"She's up-stairs; I'll tell you about her in a moment—oh, I can't think why women marry!"

"You did it yourself."

"I was young."

"Most women are—when they marry."

"Oh, no, not now; they only look it. Eve had her eyes open; she was eight and twenty, could do precisely as she liked, she had a charming little flat, and no one to worry her when she'd shaken off the relations who wanted her to live with them after her mother died. Why did she marry Herbert Burndale?"

"Don't know, darling, but is anything up?"

"Oh, Geoffrey!" She sighed adroitly, and looked at him with gratifying ad-

miration. "You are a wonderful creature! Something *is* up. She thought you went to the club after the office—"

"Does she object to seeing me?"

"She loves seeing you, darling; but she fled to my room when she heard the car stop—because she is unhappy. She and Herbert are getting on atrociously. He only cares for the country and gardening and fishing. He won't go out in London or let her; and now he has announced that he means to give up the house and they are to vegetate at the cottage all the year round."

"Well, it's a method by which they might both live to be eighty."

"Think how tiresome he'd be—more and more every year! She wants to live—to live, Geoff, dear, just as we do, she wants the flurries of life—to go to Queen's Hall concerts; to go to parties sometimes, to see her friends, to belong to a club, to walk down Bond Street, and, above all, to possess her own soul; he tries to direct her every movement, to know everything concerning her; he even looks as if he would like to read her letters, and to know how she is going to answer them—"

"He's an ass and she's an idiot."

"Why is she an idiot?"

"He's in love with her, isn't he?"

"Yes; in his own way, I suppose."

"Then she's an idiot, I repeat. For the woman who can't twist the man who loves her round her little finger must be one. See how neatly you twirl me round yours. Is she fond of him?"

Mrs. Starfield hesitated before she answered: "I don't know. It was a marriage I never understood. You see, we were in Italy, and I've not been very intimate with her since the Queen's College days. I was very fond of her then. She was a dear thing, and loved being loved so, but she was always getting into scrapes. I don't believe Herbert Burndale understands her; and I suspect he's the sort of man who doesn't think it worth while to be particularly agreeable to a wife, that he looks upon as a chattel. In fact, he represents one type of the husband of five and twenty years ago."

"He's an extinct animal; but all men have latent longings to be Bluebeards and regret a little that the good days are over."

"Ah, but think what they get in place of them! They get companions, nice little chums able to appreciate all their splendid qualities"—there was the ghost of a wink in her left eye—"to share their amusements, and to love them ten times more intelligently than they used. Why, Geoff, you old duck, I should never have recognized your angelic qualities five and twenty years ago. Think how father and mother jog-trotted along; how little they knew of each other; and, unconsciously, how much they were bored when they were thrown too much together. They were so resigned to die, poor darlings, and I don't wonder. Now, if you are only a little ill, I am miserable; and if you died I should take prussic acid—or some less painful poison: prussic acid is dreadful, I've been told. And yet we have our separate interests and enjoy ourselves even when we are not together."

"Such a pity the Burndales haven't a baby!"

"I dare say. And yet it would probably cause more friction between them. Eve would treat it as a plaything, or spoil it with adoration, and he would take it as a serious responsibility, and be as solemn as an owl; and the poor baby would be horribly bored by them both—but I wish you would go out; then I could bring her down. A woman in her state of mind doesn't want to see a man."

"I'll go—but how long will she stay?"

"I don't know—I have hardly heard anything yet. I'll tell you when you come back."

"Try and smooth things out for them."

"Of course I will."

"Burndale is rather a cold-blooded prig, but he is a good fellow at bottom."

### III

THE Starfields lived in "a pretty maisonette near the park"; white paint, panels, rugs, artistic pottery, and a general air of comfort and fair affluence, without extravagance, characterized it. The maisonette had two floors; on the upper one, on the sofa at the foot of the bed in Claire's room, Eve Burndale was lying, her head propped high with purple cushions. She held out her hands as Claire entered. They were very white, the fingers

long, the movement of the arms was helpless and caressing.

"Oh, dear Claire," she said. "I thought you would never come. What have you told Geoffrey, and where is he?"

"Gone to the club. I told him you and Herbert weren't getting on very well."

"We shall never get on; and it's no use—I've left him."

"Oh, nonsense, darling, you can't leave him!"

"I can; I must. I *can't* go back, Claire."

"You'll be miserable if you don't."

"I shall be more miserable if I do." Her voice was thrilling and very sweet.

"Don't you care for him?"

Mrs. Burndale sat up quickly, and looked her friend straight in the eyes, while she answered breathlessly: "I am going to tell you the truth, but I don't want Geoffrey to know. Can you keep anything from him?"

"I never keep my own things from him, but I don't tell other people's secrets."

There was a moment's silence; Eve looked round the charming room, as if trying to identify the things in it, and then again at her friend, as if she were frightened.

"Listen, Claire," she said. "I never loved Herbert, never for a single moment. It has all been a pretense—not to him, but to people we knew, and for the sake of conventionalities. I married him to put a chain on myself. It seems strange, but I don't believe he ever asked me if I loved him or said that he loved me—though I suppose that he did in his own way—Heaven knows. He asked me to marry him, and I did because"—she stopped, as if unable to go on—"because of my ungovernable love for somebody else, who cared nothing—nothing—nothing—I know it now—for me. That's the way things go in this world."

"Eve!"

"Yes, Eve!" Mrs. Burndale echoed. "It's a fitting name, perhaps. The Garden of Eden over again, and the serpent and the forbidden fruit; but it was a man who offered it this time, not the woman. He tried all he knew to make me taste it. I didn't—thank God, I didn't—but I was deadly afraid I should. And then I was

miserable and desperate; and to put a wall round myself, to make things impossible, I married Herbert."

"Who was it?"

"Must I tell you?"

"Do as you like."

Eve hesitated, to gather courage before she answered:

"Gerald Maddox."

"Gerald Maddox!" Claire gasped. "But he's married. It never struck me that he didn't care about his wife; she's such a pretty little thing."

"He does care. That's the queer, queer, devilish twist of things. I don't believe he ever cares for any one else. But he gets carried away and has short, vivid episodes with other women: I see now that he doesn't care for one of them. He says men are not naturally monogamous, or, as he puts it—he's a coarse brute—not physically monogamous, though mentally they are. He married Grace because he had a sincere affection for her, because he was harmlessly in love with her, because he thought she was fit to be his wife and the mother of his babies. And he takes care never to compromise himself; but he has—the episodes. When, they are over, or sometimes while they are in progress, he has a fit of repentance and gives his wife a diamond ornament, perhaps; and she never dreams that he has a thought for any other woman. And he hasn't a thought"—she made a sound of scorn—"not one that is worth counting. He wants to amuse himself. Women fall in love with him, and it amuses him—that's all."

"But if he's that sort of man, why did you let yourself care for him?"

"I didn't realize it for a long time; how could I? I was a girl and a fool. After I had the flat and went about alone I was always running against him; we sat about together and talked, and agreed that we were sympathetic and all that; then there was a night, at Aunt Emily's in Lowndes's Square. She gave a party—you were in Italy. There's a garden; it was a soft, warm night; instead of dancing, we walked up and down and went into a little tent they had put up in the corner under a tree. He told me he could die for me, that I drove him mad; he gasped and groaned and spoke as if every word were

wrong from him—he has a passionate air with him and I believed it all. I wasn't used to that kind of thing. He was! I know it now. I pictured everything to myself that night; I imagined that his wife was not sympathetic, that he didn't care for her, that he had fallen in love with me, that I was the love of his life—he told me I was, that he had never seen a woman like me. He had told heaps of other women precisely the same thing—perhaps they took it as all part of the day's work or the day's pleasure—but I took it seriously. He persuaded me to meet him, again and again, and again. We had days at Richmond and Virginia Water. We went to Winchester once and lunched there; oh, I remember it so well, the grilled mutton chops at the hotel; and the cathedral—we walked about in it and looked at the crumbling tombs of the Crusaders and the Saxon kings who are buried there: Rufus is, I think. I forgot. This was late in the autumn; it had been going on for months then; the days were short, and we heard a service—evensong—in the twilight. We were hidden far back on one of the seats in the darkness, he had his arms round me, and I loved him so. I thought he would ask me to go with him to the end of the world, for a lifetime of passionate love. I would have gone, Claire, joyfully, barefoot, ragged, lived with him, worked for him, starved for him, if he liked, died for him gladly. I felt drunk with love, dazed with joy—but, from that very day—that day at Winchester—he began to cool. It was a climax, I suppose. We had reached the top of our hill; we had looked forth from it at the sacred spaces of the sea, as Swinburne says—I don't know where, but he quoted it to me that day—he was always quoting Swinburne and Rossetti—no doubt, he has quoted them to other women, too—he doesn't care for the new school of poetry; he says it is obscure and its passion is unclean. He held me in his arms all the way back to London in the empty carriage; but at the station he put me into a cab and made an excuse for not driving me home. He looked tired, a little bored, and unconsciously I knew that the end was beginning."

"A good thing, too," Claire said vigorously.

But Eve turned on her quickly. "No, not a good thing," she said. "He had become life to me, my heart and soul were in his keeping; for months we had done all manner of things together. We heard 'Tristan' once—do you think two people who care for each other could ever hear that second act and not feel their love blaze into passion that must give them a heaven or burn them to destruction? We went to Queen's Hall; he took seats high up at the back, where nobody could see us, to hear the Pathetic Symphony, and we came away, worn out with emotion, and hid ourselves, speechless with it, in the Regent's Park. We went to stray exhibitions of pictures in Bond Street, nothing so blatant as the Academy—I saw him there, with his wife, on the view day, and thought it fitting, that he was being self-sacrificing to her and thinking of me. We went to the National Gallery sometimes; on the students' days, for we felt the presence of many people to be profane, while such love as ours was there—at least I felt all this, and he gave me to understand that he did, and suggested it to me. Oh! the days we knew together—and then the decline that began at Winchester. I have been a mad-woman ever since, mad and miserable and wicked."

"How did it end?"

"It didn't end suddenly, or anything of that sort, it gradually dwindled away. I saw him less and less often, generally when others were present. He made excuses about not meeting alone, but at last we had one, a final one, in the Regent's Park. We had always gone there because we were not likely to come across people we knew." She laughed bitterly. "We sat down, and he said he'd been thinking a good deal—that Grace was awfully good—that she was so fond of him. He twisted a finger of the glove he had in his hand—and, well, the fact was she was going to have her second baby, and he didn't think it right not to give her all the time he could. He turned and looked at me, with eyes that were consciously affectionate, and said he should never forget the day at Winchester, and the even-song, and all the rest of it, but that things must come to an end; he was not doing right by her or by me, it would be better

if we did not meet each other secretly any more, that he wanted to do the right thing though he often didn't. Then he got up suddenly—it was dark by this time, it was the beginning of winter—and said, 'Let us go back, dear.' He put me into a cab, as usual, and looked at me, and held my hand, and made his lips into the form of a kiss. A fortnight later I heard of him—I didn't see him—dining with a woman who looked like an Italian, at the Hotel Cecil in a recess by the window, and one day I passed them in the Park—in the twilight, of course—they were leaning over the bridge looking at the Serpentine. Their backs were toward me, so they didn't see me, but I heard her laughter, low and sweet and very happy. I knew the things he was saying to her—and I hated him—then for the first time. I've hated him ever since, for I know that he plays the same game over and over again, and his wife is as blind as a bat; he fools her just as he fools other women."

"I thought, apart from his family, he was taken up with art and music and precious literature."

"Oh, yes, that's all part of it. It gives rainbow colors to his affairs. Perhaps the other women think so, too. Or perhaps they are used to the sort of flirtation to which he treats them, and go back to their husbands quite content, if they are married women, just as he goes back to his wife and is thoroughly pleased with himself. It's all part of a pleasant game to him, and perhaps it is to them or to some of them; but I was a moth that was caught in the flame and burnt—burnt. Oh, how I hate him!" She put her face down for a moment into the purple silk cushion and shivered.

"But if you hate him, you can't love him still."

"It's only the reverse side of the coin," Eve said with miserable cynicism. "To have an awfully strong feeling for a man, or a burning passion of any sort, may mean hate or love; it's just a toss-up, and depends on which side of the coin comes down; under it is always hidden the other—" She looked at her friend; her confession had been made with a hushed vehemence; it was impossible to doubt its truth or the reality of her feeling.

Claire Starfield, whose life had been pleasant enough, full of affection rather than passion, was puzzled what to do, and worried at having a confidence thrust upon her she could not share with her husband. She knew that one reason why Eve had come to her and poured out her story was that she felt it would be safe in her keeping.

"I thought you must care for Herbert—" she said at last.

"I have never cared for him, but I thought that marrying him would be my salvation, that I should be able to control my thoughts as well as my actions."

"You seemed fairly happy together."

"Oh, yes," Eve answered wearily, for the excitement of unburdening herself had died away. "I didn't want to let him down in the eyes of his friends, but I expect he knew he had only the shadow and not the substance."

"But he loves you?" Claire said gently.

"I suppose so—I never feel quite sure. I know this, that I dread—dread—going to live the quiet country life he insists upon. I shouldn't see Gerald now and then by chance, or imagine that I might see him if I went down Bond Street, or to a popular play. I live for the chances still, and, when I think that one of them may come off, my heart stands still—"

"But why this sudden crisis?"

"Herbert wants me to go away and live in the country, to bury me altogether. If he had given me the usual excitements of life in London, if he had done anything—anything!" She put her hands behind her head and gave a little moan of pain.

All the time Claire was gathering an idea and wondering if she had the courage to exploit it. "I can't think how you can bear to live," she said wonderingly.

Eve felt that the sympathy for which she hungered was coming. "It has been so difficult—"

"Of course it has—" Claire answered in an understanding voice. "And it's all so absurd."

"Absurd!"

"Wait, dear! Tea's ready—come down and have some, and I'll explain."

"Oh, I can't. I don't want tea!"

"Yes, you do—we always want it. It clears one's brain. And then I'll tell you what I mean and try to make you see it.

I think it will help you." She pulled her friend up gently and smoothed her hair and, putting an affectionate arm round her, led her down to the drawing-room, where a dainty little tea-table was ready and muffins sat in a covered dish on a brass footman in front of the fire.

"Now, dear, a nice, comfy chair and cushions." And then Claire made tea and smiled and looked sympathetic. "Two lumps of sugar? You were always a baby for sweet things, you wicked darling. Do you remember when the history professor brought you that box of chocolates and Miss Wilson made a fuss? There, is that right? And now some muffin—do you know that no country but England makes good muffins? I am told they can't get them in America, though they have all sorts of bread that we haven't."

"No, I didn't know it," said Eve fretfully, when she had put down her cup. "And I don't want to talk of bread or America, or of anything in the world, but this one great thing that engrosses me. Do speak, Claire! I have no one else in the world to help me." She sighed. "And you were always wonderful to me—you were when I thought I cared for that silly boy at Woolwich, and he got into a scrape for coming to London without leave? And think of all you did for me when mother died!" She held out her hands for a moment. Claire bent her head and kissed them. "You always helped me, darling," Eve went on, "and I knew you would once more. If you hadn't been abroad all that time it might have been different. I was so lonely in the flat, and I never had any relation I cared about except mother—and Florence, of course, who went to India—I had to come to you." Her eyes were full of tragedy. "But now, tell me how it is absurd?"

"Well, you see—" Claire hesitated and hated herself for her brutality. "For one thing, because it's all so old-fashioned."

"Old-fashioned!"

"Of course it is. And I always thought you so modern, so full of the new life of the world, so receptive to it." She knew the last words would arrest the rising indignation that was qualifying the surprise of her listener. "Yet you are behaving just as people do in second-rate novels—or as some few silly women did thirty

years ago. They don't do it now, they don't, indeed, dear. It's like a grandmother, or a great-aunt, or a 'tuppence colored' picture; we prefer them 'penny plain' nowadays unless the color is first-rate. Don't you see, darling?"

"No, I don't. And I don't understand you a bit." Eve was beginning to doubt her friend's sanity. "People fall in love, I suppose."

"Oh, yes, but in a nice pleasant sort of way. They flirt, of course, as girls, they fall in love, and get engaged and married; and then they amuse themselves with their husbands until they get bored. Then, if there are no children, they take up other interests—there are so many other interests for women nowadays. Overwhelming love is quite out of date; hopelessly old-fashioned; it is, indeed!"

"You are perfectly ridiculous, Claire; you have become matter-of-fact and un-human," Eve said indignantly. "Think, think how many people are divorced now—more than ever before—and give up everything for love."

"They don't, really. They only think they do. They are bored with their husbands or wives, or they're restless and ready to do anything for a change, and don't care what it is. So they are unfaithful; sometimes they run away, and are divorced, and imagine they are going to be in love forever. It's a breathless excitement, but the experience is seldom so amusing as they expect it to be—for the woman especially. The man has made love to her because she was pretty, or he was in love with her—for a little while—or flattered at her being in love with him. The vanity of men, darling, is as infinite as space; they like to bask and bathe themselves in it. But a man is seldom able to live very long up to the exactations of the woman who throws everything overboard for him; he doesn't know what to do with her excessive emotion; for, as a rule, she keeps up the emotional side much longer than he does. He likes the adventure of going off with her, of course, but when the novelty wanes he probably resents the fact that he is adrift from his old haunts and many of the things he valued. And then, at the back of his head, he knows that the woman who has played her husband false, even

when she has done it for him, would do it again, given the temptation, and he hasn't much respect for her."

"Respect!" Eve muttered.

"Oh, yes, it's a horrid thing, I know, but if a man hasn't any for a woman he becomes suspicious, and, as I say, he doesn't think much of her, even if she's desperately in love with him; and, above all, passion doesn't wear as well as it used. It doesn't, indeed, darling."

"Oh!" with a little moan.

"And you would have found that Gerald Maddox wouldn't do for a permanency, even if he had wished it."

"I think everything you say is dreadful, and I wish I had never, never told you. I didn't dream you were so cold and matter-of-fact."

"I'm not cold," Claire answered quickly. "But I have the courage to look things squarely in the face."

"You never felt the fascination of a man like Gerald Maddox."

"No, thank God, I never did. A common creature who amuses himself with first one woman and then another. And if I did I think I should have the nerve to stamp on it, to hate myself, to get control of it somehow, especially if he had a wife. She's a dear little thing, too. I know her a little. We met them at the Waltons' dinner-party last month. They came in looking perfectly happy and content with each other. They were in the hall when we were going away, and I saw him turn up the little fur collar of her coat—such a pretty coat it was, cherry-colored brocade, and she looked charming in it. Oh, my dear Eve, you must scratch Gerald Maddox out of your life; you are a thousand times too good for him."

"Too good!" Eve echoed. "You think me dreadfully wicked, I know."

"No, I don't, darling. Of course I don't. Do have some more tea."

Eve shook her head with quick anger. It seemed an insult to offer her tea at such a moment.

"I wish I hadn't told you," she repeated in a low voice.

"I'm glad you did, you dear stupid darling!" Claire went over to the sofa and put her arms round the trembling figure and kissed the troubled eyes. "You will get through it," she said.

"But what am I going to do—I can't go on living with Herbert; he has such cold blue eyes and such a hard voice."

"But you must have known this before," Claire remarked cheerily; "he was always a visible quantity. Wasn't it foolish to marry him?"

Eve turned to the fire—the sofa was beside it—and, putting her elbows on her knees, she looked into the dull red glow.

"I did it to save myself. I didn't think I should be cut off from all the things that would have served as ropes to steady me, and I thought the mere fact of being married would prevent me from thinking of Gerald. You see, I'm not really wicked." She looked up imploringly.

"Of course not—you are only a dear, idiotic darling."

"I have been faithful—of course I have—to Herbert. I thought he would be different, and I should be grateful and very nice to him. But he freezes me. Think of being buried in the country with him!" She seemed to visualize the situation. "The cottage is four miles from a station, two miles from anything at all. It isn't even near a road along which motor-cars whiz. It's near nothing but some dull walks over flat country, a few fields with here and there a stile, and occasionally a weedy, patchy bit of wood. There's the river just a little way off, a dreary bit of narrow river that seems to have been put aside by Nature away from life and somehow forgotten. Oh, how I adore life, Claire!" She looked up again and the sudden light that came and went on her face was wonderful. "And how much I want to live! Herbert would fish in the river for hours and hours if we went there. He always does. We should garden for hours and hours. On wet days we should read; but all the books are dull and heavy; he never has a box of new novels down: they don't amuse him. Every day we should take a walk, getting in punctually to our well-set meals. He would look at me from the top of the table, and I at him from the bottom, not talking much, we never do; perhaps he would ask me if I had a headache; and then we should walk up and down the garden again for half an hour, till he said, 'I think we will go in,' and then he would read again or ask me to do

a game of chess. There's no emotion in chess, only skill, of the dull, calculating sort. I always shudder as I take the red and white pieces out of their brown wooden box. They are like him, somehow, chilly and hard and clear-cut."

She looked into the fire again, and they were silent for a minute or two.

"Eve, darling," Claire said gently, in a non-committal voice, "do you remember 'Alice in Wonderland'?"

"Why, yes, of course I do," Eve answered impatiently. "But what has it to do with me?"

"I was thinking of a line in one of the immortal poems of the book. I often quote it to myself when people contradict me. 'There is another shore, you know, upon the other side.'"

"Well?"

"You see, there's another point of view. You haven't looked across to the other side, dear. Lots of men delight in fishing and country life, and even some women do. Now, I think—" But what Claire thought at that particular moment is not recorded, for the door opened, the maid announced, "Mr. Burndale," and he walked in.

His wife locked her hands and waited. Claire rose and greeted him cordially.

"How pleasant of you!" she said with a little laugh. 'A laugh sets many a human clock right' was a proverb she was rather proud of inventing. "Have you come to tea?"

"I knew Eve was here and came to fetch her," he answered in a precise voice.

Claire looked up at him. Yes, his eyes were cold, she thought; but they were capable of expressing kindness, and he gave her the impression, in the swift moment in which she considered him, that he was a man one could trust and would be glad to know in a moderate way that lacked intimacy; but he would never provoke a quick, passionate love of the sort to safeguard and satisfy a woman of Eve's type. A thoughtful, reflective regard, or at best a cold devotion, would probably be his life's harvest, and the one that he would care to reap.

He looked across at his wife; he saw the shadow of fear that had settled on her face; but it had no effect on him.

"There's a taxi waiting," he said.

"I thought perhaps Claire would keep me for the night. I was going to ask her." She looked appealingly at her friend.

But Claire was determined to manage the affair with merciless, though beneficial, diplomacy. "We are dining out and going to the play," she said. "I am so sorry, darling."

"I could stay here; I should like a quiet evening." It was half an entreaty.

"We are going home," Mr. Burndale said quietly.

Then Claire had another inspiration.

"I'm going to leave you two together, to have a talk," she said. "It's no good pretending that you don't want one, you do—I'll come back in half an hour." She blew Eve a little kiss as if to give her courage, and went quickly to the door.

Mr. Burndale followed her out. "I'll pay the taxi," he said. "We can easily get another."

When the door was shut, she turned on him. "Be kind to her. She wants to be loved, to be told that she's loved," she said in a whisper, and hurried past him, up to her own room.

He stood still for a moment, taken by surprise. Then, having paid the taxi, he went back to the drawing-room.

Up-stairs Claire threw herself down on the sofa at the foot of the bed from which she had rescued Eve half an hour before.

"Oh, I was a wretch, a pig, a brute, to her," she told herself; "but it was no good being sympathetic. She would only have gone on nursing her emotion and ruining her life. Some of the things I said must have been pretty quenching—but I am glad he has come. She might have gone and drowned herself or something—but I'm a pig and a brute all the same!"

#### IV

EVE had risen. She was leaning against the corner of the mantelpiece. He hardly looked at her. She knew it and resented it. "He doesn't care—he doesn't care. He doesn't even know how to care," she thought.

He seated himself on the opposite side of the fireplace before he spoke.

"What does all this mean?" he asked. "I don't understand your note. Sit

down; we have half an hour before us and had better discuss it quietly. What does it mean?"

She sat down and locked her hands together. "I can't go on," she said. "We are neither of us happy. You seem content sometimes—I never am."

"What is it you want?"

"I want to be free."

"Marriage isn't a thing to be taken in hand lightly, as the ceremony warned us, but, having done so, we can't lay it aside for a caprice."

"It's not caprice. I am miserable."

He waited for a minute before he answered: "I have felt that. But I hoped that time, and the habit of being together, your womanly duties and my usual occupations, would gradually assimilate into a fairly harmonious whole. I think you expect too much from life. Very few people get all they want."

"All! I get nothing that I want."

"You seem to dislike the idea of going to the cottage?"

"I hate it!" she flashed. "I couldn't bear it again. I dread seeing that dull, gray river, meandering across the flat land, and feeling that it isn't even deep enough to drown oneself in."

"But why this extraordinary dislike to the place?" he asked calmly. "Lots of people live in the country altogether, find pleasant occupations, and are content—happy. It's rather absurd to refer to it, but the Garden of Eden, in which our first parents lived, was a place in the country. We went to Paris; but most marriages begin with a honeymoon spent in country seclusion, and it's supposed to be the happiest time of one's life. Why should not we be content in the country?"

"I don't love you enough to bear it," she said slowly. She knew that her words were cruel; and in a deadened way she hated herself for saying them.

There was a long silence.

"Why did you marry me?" he asked.

"I don't know—I oughtn't—"

"It hasn't been a success for me any more than for you. I've known all the time that you didn't care. You will remember that I never asked you if you did. I carefully avoided doing so."

"Why did *you* marry me?" she asked. "I don't think you loved me."

He looked away from her when he answered and his voice was very low—it was different altogether. "I wanted to—to save you—I thought I could—"

"To save me!"

"One day I was at Winchester—my nephew was at the school—I went to the afternoon service in the cathedral. It was getting dark, and you thought you were hidden in the shadows—I was still farther behind—I saw you plainly. A man's arm was round your shoulders—"

"Did you see who it was?" she asked faintly.

"No. It was not my business. I avoided doing so. But it set me thinking about you."

She waited breathlessly for more. "Did you ever see me with him again?"

"No. But the fact that you were there, alone with him, told me a great deal. Whenever I saw you afterward I knew that you were unhappy. I thought you a beautiful woman." He said it quite coldly, but it was so strange to hear him say it at all. "Gradually your face became worn and your eyes looked hunted and tragic. I knew a girl once—years ago. A scoundrel made love to her and ruined her life—she was a Catholic and went into a sisterhood. She made it her refuge, a place to save herself in from deep waters. She had the same look on her face that yours had—for months."

He stopped for a moment.

"Yes?"

"I had been waiting for my share in life—if I was ever to have a share that counted—I thought I might make things better for you. I knew you didn't care for me. I wasn't in love with you, but I was sorry, and possessed by you. When you married me I felt that you'd taken refuge with me, as that girl was doing in the convent."

"You never tried to make me love you," she complained.

"I felt that it was too soon, that it would have to come gradually, if at all, that the other must wear itself out first."

She was afraid to look at him, and ashamed. "I hated the dulness, the duties, the routine. You gave me no freedom. I felt in prison—watched—"

"I meant to do my best; I only watched you from anxiety, not with an idea of

knowing anything you didn't wish to tell me. You will remember that I never tried to sound any of the secret recesses of your life—the mental reservations we all have. I tried, by an entirely different set of surroundings and ways, to draw you away from the old ones. I thought I was being subtle by reversing everything—but I have evidently made a failure of it," he added formally.

There was a long silence, then she spoke again. "I think," she said slowly, "that I have been dreadfully selfish."

"Perhaps." He considered for a moment before he added: "Yes, I think you have. But I have been dense, so we are even, and the result is that we sit here with—with a sand-castle flattened out between us." It was the only bit of metaphor she had ever heard from him. "Tell me what you wish," he said coldly. "I will try and meet you if I can."

Her eyes filled with tears; she resented them and sat very still, dull and hopeless. "I wish I had known—I have been a fool," she said. She hungered for a contradiction, and to feel his arms, the thin arms of the man to whom she was married, go round her; but he made no sign.

"I have been a fool, too," he said wearily. He stopped abruptly and added: "I never had much to do with women—I don't know how to manage them."

"They don't want to be managed, they want to be loved," she said passionately, but almost to herself.

He looked at her wonderingly—doubtfully. She avoided his eyes and turned to the fire again.

"How can we mend up matters?" he asked.

"Mend up?"

"You want to be free?"

She raised her head, an entreating look was in her eyes, and he saw it. "I don't know," she said.

"You don't want to go to the cottage?"

"Oh, but I will, I will," she said impulsively. "I've been a beast!"

He got up then, hesitated, and stood before her. "Would you care to go abroad?"

She got up, too, at that and faced him. "Abroad!" She put out her hands, and drew them back again, just as she had in the morning.

"I have always wished to go to Amer-

ica, and then along the Canadian Pacific to the Rocky Mountains, to Vancouver, and down the Pacific coast to California," he explained.

"Oh—" her face lighted up.

"I want to see Santa Barbara," he went on. "I hear it's a singularly beautiful place. Would you care to go?"

"I should love it!"

"You would love it," he said cynically. "Then we'll do it; but it would be more to the point if you loved me."

"I will—I will—if you will let me."

He looked at her unbelievingly for a moment; then the thin man did put his arms round her.

"I will be different," she said. "I will be quite different. I have been a perfect perfect beast!"

He laughed, a happy laugh: it was another strange thing to hear.

"And I have been a perfect perfect fool! So again we are even."

"I am glad of that," she whispered.

His arms tightened. "And we'll sell the cottage, or burn it down—which would you prefer?"

"I think"—she hesitated—"that perhaps we shall want to go there when we come back."

He stooped and kissed her.

"Geoffrey, old duck," Claire said to her husband when he returned, "you must take me out to dinner and the play. I'll get ready at once; for I told the Burndales that we were going to do that, and I don't want to feel that I am a little liar."